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SUBJECT: GVN Discusses Domestic Violence Prevention

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11. (U) SUMMARY: During her June 9-11 meetings with GVN officials in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, Andrea Bottner, Senior Coordinator, Office of International Women's Issues, highlighted progress and discussed challenges related to domestic violence in Vietnam. Ms. Bottner praised the passage of legislation on gender equality and on prevention of domestic violence (reftel), shared resources, and encouraged continued attention to ongoing challenges. Despite recent legislation and a solid commitment by officials to address the problem, effective prevention of domestic violence in Vietnam remains a long-term effort. END SUMMARY.

DV Law: Passage and Implementation

12. (U) The Family Department of the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism (MCST) has overall responsibility for coordinating the directives and decrees that must be drafted and signed for the Law on Domestic Violence Prevention and Control (DV Law), passed in November 2007, to go into effect on July 1, 2008. Mr. Le Do Ngoc, Director General of the Family Department, explained that the Prime Minister's Directive, issued May 30, 2008, assigns implementation and enforcement tasks related to the DV Law to various ministries. Two guidance decrees - to be published by the GVN in July 2008, following comment by the Prime Minister's cabinet - will follow this Directive. Mr. Ngoc noted that the two draft decrees, posted to the MCST website for public comment, are attracting a great deal of public interest.

Rural Areas: A Particular Challenge

13. (U) Regarding the GVN's strategy to implement the DV law in isolated, rural areas, Mr. Ngoc conceded that reaching remote communities is challenging for all social services and noted the added dimension of the differing languages and cultural traditions of the numerous ethnic minorities throughout Vietnam. GVN officials rely on local resources, he said, such as the Vietnam Women's Union (VWU) and the Vietnam Fatherland Front (VFF), to raise public awareness about domestic violence and provide training at local levels. Mr. Ngoc emphasized the importance of the participation of local people, as ultimately domestic violence is an issue for the whole community.

DV Law: A Legislative First

14. (U) Mr. Dang Thanh Son, Deputy Director of Administration and Criminal Legislation Department, Ministry of Justice, told Ms. Bottner that the DV law was the first time a National Assembly committee took the lead in drafting a law, and sought input from various ministries, the VWU and VFF, as well as the UN and NGOs. Mr. Luong Phan Cu, Vice Chair of the National Assembly Committee on

Social Affairs, confirmed that the DV law is stronger as a result of the joint effort, but revealed that consideration of the law in the National Assembly caused a heated debate. Many National Assembly members expressed concern that the law would "interfere with" or "wreck" the unity of the family.

15. (U) In terms of next steps, Mr. Son observed that many question the feasibility of implementing and enforcing the law. The GVN is now drafting the sub-laws and regulations (decrees, circulars, directives, etc.) for implementation, sparking debates on the "how" of the law, including how to identify victims and report incidents. He cautioned that full implementation is likely to take a long time, given the sensitivity of the family issues involved.

Changing Attitudes, Increasing Awareness

16. (U) Mr. Ngoc shared what was to become a familiar refrain during Ms. Bottner's visit: domestic violence has long been considered a private family matter in Vietnam. The inviolate nature of the family in Vietnamese culture and pressure on Vietnamese women to be agreeable and maintain harmony in the family combined with the society's acceptance of the husband's right to "correct" his wife and children through violence makes changing the attitudes of government officials and ordinary citizens an uphill battle.

17. (U) While confirming his belief that domestic violence damages both families and society, Mr. Cu highlighted that Vietnam's Confucian culture makes it very difficult for victims to come forward as women often lack the self-confidence to make their abuse public and there is insufficient social support to help them when they do. While HCMC's domestic violence hotline received over one hundred calls in the past year, People's Council Chairwoman Pham Phuong Thao admitted that many women "suffer in silence" either because they assume the blame for their own abuse or because they

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are skeptical about the efficacy of outside support networks.

18. (SBU) When HCMC government officials discussed cases of domestic violence where they had intervened to stop abuse, it was clear the ultimate goal was reunification of the families and reconciliation between couples. Most asserted that reconciliation should be the primary goal, complicating the development of a formal shelter system for domestic violence victims who wish to leave an abusive family situation. Several officials blamed domestic violence on external factors, like poverty, economic changes, alcoholism and conflicts with in-laws, rather than recognizing the behavioral issues and putting the appropriate blame on the abuser.

19. (U) Ms. Bottner acknowledged that the hardest part of addressing domestic violence is changing cultural attitudes towards the problem. Ms. Bottner explained that the impetus for change in the U.S. criminal justice system came from women who demanded the government address the issue, but there is still a continuing need for awareness and education about the issue.

110. (U) Mr. Ngoc underscored improvements in public awareness of domestic violence as a societal problem. Public awareness is the key activity in Vietnam's National Program of Action for Domestic Violence Prevention and Control, he explained. MCST will conduct mass media campaigns twice a year and the VWU will undertake public awareness activities at local levels including providing training to local authorities.

Role of Reconciliation Committees

111. (U) Mr. Ngoc emphasized that family reconciliation is fundamental to Vietnam's response to domestic violence. Within a neighborhood or village, a reconciliation committee may offer its assistance in dispute mediation to families experiencing domestic violence. Mr. Ngoc went on to suggest that the reconciliation committee should be the first recourse for a domestic violence victim; if the abuse worsens, then law enforcement authorities could become involved. In either case, Mr. Ngoc stated that the incident

should be reported to commune's People's Committee Chairman or other appropriate community leaders. In Mr. Cu's view, a woman who finds herself the victim of domestic violence should choose whether to report directly to local authorities or to ask the reconciliation committee to step in. While the DV law is unclear as to whether a response by the reconciliation committee or the local authorities will take precedence, Mr. Son confirmed that the implementing regulations will require community leaders to report cases of domestic violence to law enforcement authorities.

¶12. (U) Ms. Bottner engaged GVN officials regarding the need for the entire community to play a role in solving the problem of domestic violence, explaining the U.S. coordinated community response model and suggesting ways in which this model might inform the GVN's response to domestic violence. Vietnam's focus on the family lends itself well to the idea that a response to domestic violence requires coordination and cooperation among the entire community of service professionals - mental health counselors, medical professionals, government officials, officials from the justice sector, and police officers. GVN officials were receptive to the overall concept, but cautioned that it would be some time before Vietnam could provide a level of coordinated services received by victims in the U.S.

Shelters and Services for Victims

¶13. (U) The DV Law specifies five types of support facilities for victims of domestic violence: 1) health clinics; 2) Social Protection Centers; 3) support centers; 4) Counseling Centers for the prevention and control of domestic violence; and 5) Reliable Addresses within the community. Only the first two currently exist. Social Protection Centers are government-run centers caring for orphans, the elderly, the disabled, and other groups in need. The DV law requires these Centers to provide assistance to domestic violence victims, although their ability to do so is likely very limited.

¶14. (U) Mr. Ngoc explained that "Reliable Addresses" are the residences of community leaders, such as the commune People's Committee Chairman, VFF representative or VWU representative. These community leaders might also be reconciliation committee members assisting the couple in crisis. Under the DV law, Reliable Addresses are to be designated by the commune People's Committee in coordination with the VFF and announced publicly so women know where to go if a shelter is not available or is too far away. Mr. Son added that training will be provided for people in the network of Reliable Address on the dynamics of domestic violence and how to respond to reported cases.

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Comment

¶15. (SBU) Vietnam continues to make solid progress on the prevention of and response to domestic violence, although entrenched cultural attitudes and the low level of public awareness about the issue mean that the GVN still has much work to do. The theme of increased awareness, training and education continued throughout Ms. Bottner's meetings. Other key challenges discussed include the difficulties in implementing the DV law in isolated rural areas; cultural sensitivities, including those of ethnic minority populations; and effective intergovernmental coordination as well as cooperation with non-governmental stakeholders. Although some GVN officials responsible for implementing the DV law still lack an understanding of the complex dynamics of domestic violence, officials generally expressed a willingness to learn more, along with a genuine desire to address the problem. Ms. Bottner's visit was a key opportunity to highlight the importance of combating domestic violence with the GVN. Post continues to receive positive feedback on the visit and highly appreciates G/IWI's engagement in Vietnam. End comment.

¶16. (U) This cable was jointly prepared with ConGen Ho Chi Minh City and cleared by G/IWI.

